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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses several factors that contribute to running away, characteristics of runaways, and approaches to dealing with runaway youth. The decision of a youth to run away is usually the climax of several smaller events that have built over time and contribute to the youth's feeling out-of-control at home, in school, and in society. Peers are highly influential in a youth's decision to run. While runaways seek a more tolerable existence, their hopes and dreams diminish as they try to fulfill even their most basic needs of food and shelter. Runaways' economic and emotional dependencies have been associated with a host of problems such as theft, sexual promiscuity, prostitution, and drug use. Because the dimensions of the problem of runaway youth are not well understood, it is impossible to prescribe precise interventions. A runaway has three primary options to consider: (1) returning to the family; (2) living in a foster or group home; or (3) remaining on the streets. Whatever the choice, it will have a major impact on the runaway's life. Without support or counsel the first two will be problematic solutions. If the third option is elected the chances of successful adaptation to society will become increasingly remote. Mental health professionals and school personnel can provide or arrange individual and family interventions, offer support and encouragement, and, therefore, can help the youth communicate, cope, and adjust. (LLL)

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Runaways: A Silent Crisis

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Runaways: A Silent Crisis

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Abstract

In this country one million children flee their homes each year. This silent crisis has become a perplexing social problem. This article will discuss several ecological factors that contribute to running away, characteristic behaviors of runaways, and approaches to dealing with the crisis.

An epidemic is sweeping America and many people are unaware of its occurrence. As many as one million children flee their families each year in order to seek a new life (Young, Godfrey, Matthew, 1983; Palenski, 1984). According to Nye (1980), one out of eight children will run away by their eighteenth birthday. They are our nation's young. They are vulnerable and frequently victim to all the dangers of the criminal subculture that our society tolerates. Despite large increases in numbers of runaways each year the problem is a forgotten and silent crisis. This has become a national crisis and a perplexing social problem.

Available statistics do not adequately describe the problem. No one knows how many children run each year, because frequently parents do not report their children as being missing. Other factors that further confound the validity of conclusions based upon available data are apparent from a review of relevant state laws. Only 26 states make specific references to runaway children in their juvenile codes. Of those states, definitions vary considerably with regard to several basic criteria such as (a) the length of time that a child must be missing, (b) the role of parental consent, and (c) the maximum age of the child (Palenski, 1984).

This paper will discuss several of the factors that contribute to running away, characteristics of runaways, approaches to dealing with runaway youth. Attention will be given to preventive measures that may be drawn in the school setting. The common denominators in definitions of a runaway are that (a) the child is between the ages of 10 and 17, and (b) leaves home without parental consent for at least 48 hours with the intention of running away. Those basic definitional criteria will be used for this paper.

Causes of Running Away

The crises that cause youth to run appear to be complex interactions of factors and circumstances that are typically external to the individual, rather than internal psychological factors (Chapman, 1976). Youths run because they cannot change conditions that for them have become intolerable. Running away is generally not an appealing alternative, but at the time it happens it frequently appears as the only alternative. Running away may be described as a means by which the youth tries to take control of life (Chapman, 1976). As such, running away is a desperate solution.

Four general conditions appear to be consistently important in the understanding and prevention of running away. Those conditions are related to family issues, school problems, peer relationships, and societal demands and pressures.

Families. Frequently runaways are from families that are beset by some sort of dysfunction. The families may be plagued by economic hardship, divorce, desertion, death, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, physical abuse, or chronic transience. Typically their families lack stability, solidarity, and self-assurance. Research has consistently documented alarming incidences of abuse and neglect among the families of runaways (Janus et al., 1987; Garbarino et al., 1986).

Running away is often the climax of embattled emotions between parent(s) and child. Kramer and Schmidt (1987) report that two-thirds of runaways characterized relationships with their parents as poor or hostile. The child lacks attention, affection, understanding and warm family relationships. Poor communications within the family are common and sum to create an atmosphere that is hostile, unhealthy, and filled with arguments.

Peers. Peer relationships are tremendously important to most youth. For older children and youth, peers can exert as much, or more, influence over the development of values and attitudes as the institutions of family and school. Peer influences are important factors in reaching the decision to run away and subsequent decisions to stay away. In the cases of youth who lack emotional nurturance, or are in conflict with families will look toward peers for support, and perhaps guidance. For youth who are considering running away, peers provide a belief that their intolerable situation can be improved without running. Peers also provide survival support after actually hitting the streets (Palenski, 1984). Emotional bonds that form between peers are strong. Children often run in pairs and gravitate to some forms of communal living (Palenski, 1984).

Society. Society's demands are fundamental to the problem of runaway children and youth. Socio-cultural demands are interpreted by the families and peers and transmitted toward the individual who in turn is in the process of interpreting and coping with the apparent problems. In modern American society social institutions have undergone such substantial and rapid change that apparent stability has been lost.

It is not surprising that runaways frequently report having rejected traditional social values and established societal values. They see those values as leading to further loneliness and frustration. Runaways are seeking a humane, caring and supportive society.

School. School, itself, is not a clear determinant for causing youth to run away. The school environment is one that clearly provides for the expression of societal values and pressures, peer relationships. It is also frequently a source of contention between parents and children.

Three types of children are "at-risk" for running in the school environment: (a) the successful student who comes to feel overwhelmed or angered by relentless pressures, (b) the child who consistently fails and begins to believe s/he is a misfit, and thus, tries to escape to save dignity, and (c) the chronically transient child who grows up without friends, and, thus, without a sense of belonging in the school (Chapman, 1976).

Realities of Running Away

While runaways seek a more tolerable existence, their hopes and dreams diminish quickly as they try to fulfill even their most basic needs of food and shelter. They are frequently too young or too inadequately trained to obtain adequate employment. Financial resources dry up quickly. They will depend on handouts, drift in the streets, and seek refuge in doorways and public buildings. These youths become lost from the community. They have no sense of direction. Many will be easy prey to exploitation as they struggle to survive. Younger and more immature children are more vulnerable and hungrier for human empathy, support, and guidance.

Runaways' economic and emotional dependencies have been associated with a host of problems such as theft, sexual promiscuity, prostitution, and drug use (Cohen, 1987; Young et al., 1983). Certainly such compounding problems are sometimes the result of running away. For some runaways, those problems are part of the conditions that contribute to decisions to run. In either case, such social deviances keep the runaway outside the mainstream of society. They are common

problems that stymie efforts of preventing and retrieving runaway children and youth.

Interventions with Runaways

Because the dimensions of the problem of runaway youth are not well understood, it is impossible to prescribe precise interventions. Some characteristics of runaways may, however, inform the efforts to predict and intervene with runaways. Interventions may be divided into three classes: generic, mental health, and school-based.

Runaway characteristics. There is no single characteristic that can be used easily to predict the probability that a youth will run away. There are, however, several indicators that can alert parents, educators, and mental health professionals to the possibility. These signs include: (a) a sudden change in behavior (especially if a child becomes withdrawn), (b) increased complaining and expressions of disillusionment, (c) loss of interest in studying, (d) plummeting grades, (e) acting out in class, (f) resisting authority, (g) staying out late at night, (h) failing to tell parents where they are going, and (i) reports of increased tension between themselves and their family (Breton, 1978).

A generic intervention. This 12-point generic approach can be utilized when dealing with a runaway crisis. Attempting to follow this approach will also help the therapist assess the severity of the runaway's crisis.

1. Respond to the youth's feelings, and encourage the release of those highly charged emotions.
2. Assess the severity of the situation (e.g., has the youth already run or in the process of considering running).
3. Determine how realistic the youth's plans are. For example, how much money is in the youth's possession? Where does s/he plan to go? How will food and shelter be obtained? How will money be earned?

4. Identify the youth's network of support. Does it include friends, parents, relatives, neighbors, clergy, or teachers? What roles do significant people play in the youth's life and development?
5. Determine what has recently happened in the youth's family, school, and social environments.
6. Determine if anything as this has happened before.
7. Discover how the child has responded to problems with family, friends, and school in the past.
8. Try to get a verbal agreement with the youth not to run away until they speak to you face-to-face.
9. Focus on getting pressure off the youth. It is apt to be necessary to ask for assistance and cooperation from relatives, parents, peers, clergy and/or runaway shelters.
10. Try to reestablish communication between parent(s) and child.
11. Refer the family to a family therapist.
12. If the parents fail to cooperate, assist the child in learning coping strategies and arrange for placement in a foster home or child-care program.

Mental health intervention. Although school personnel and mental health workers are in key positions to help diffuse the youth's anxiety, depression, and confusion, their task is not at all easy. The runaway experiences an exhausting crisis which is likely to involve a combination of incidents that have been brewing for some time. Some prospective runaways will have unrealistic estimates of their needs and resources. Youth who have already run away or are considering it are apt to believe that there is little for them at home. They are also aware of the uncertainty of their situation.

In the face-to-face crisis interview, the therapist is entangled in a complex, highly emotional situation where action and advice are expected, or even demanded.

Mental health professionals need to respond with quick wit, composure, and compassion. The most crucial things that mental health professionals will need to remember are that they need to (a) be reflective listeners, (b) give honest feedback to the youth, (c) channel anger in productive directions, and (d) encourage the youth in healthy communication. The mental health worker should strive to be warm, consistent, and offer supportive counsel.

School interventions. A number of preventive measures can be implemented in the school setting. They include:

1. Providing inservice for teachers, counselors, and administrators on topics such as the characteristics of potential runaways, developing communications with parents and youth, and coping with runaway youth in schools.
2. Develop guidance programs that will help students cope with the stresses of adolescence and growth.
3. Develop work programs within school curriculum to help the student develop skills, learn responsibility and belonging, and earn money.
4. Provide individual or family counseling to assist youth and their families in dealing productively with problems as they happen.
5. Offer potential runaways opportunities, such as relaxation training sessions, to help them cope more effectively with tension.
6. Provide peer group therapies to help youth develop positive peer support.
7. Arrange with various outside agencies (e.g., Y.M.C.A., churches, scouts, etc.) in order to channel and direct the student's free time.
8. Encourage "at-risk" students to participate in extracurricular activities.

Conclusion

The decision of a youth to run away is usually the climax of several smaller events that have built over time and contribute to the student's feeling out-of-control at home, in school, and in society. Peers are highly influential in a youth's decision

to run. A runaway has three primary options to consider: (a) returning to the family, (b) living in a foster or group home, or (c) remaining on the streets. Whatever the choice, it will have a major impact on the runaway's life. Without support or counsel the first two will be problematic solutions. If the third option is elected the chances of successful adaptation to society will become increasingly remote. Mental health professionals and school personnel can provide or arrange individual and family interventions, offer support and encouragement, and, thus, can help the youth communicate, cope and adjust.

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